

Review Article Related to Pedagogy for Teachers of Homiletics

Best Practices in Education: Responsibly Teaching the History of Preaching

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Abstract: *A recent evaluation of the histories of preaching by Hughes Oliphant Old and O.C. Edwards, Jr. raises concerns for what students learn about the history of preaching. It also raises questions of whether or not teachers should use course materials that perpetuate racism and racial biases or if used, how those materials need to be introduced with preparatory words of caution. Whether or not these resources are used, additional resources need to be made available to students so that they may have a more realistic and expansive view of the history of preaching.*

In an earlier issue of *Homiletic*, Allie Utley published an article reviewing the pedagogical practices of grading used by teachers of homiletics (Vol. 47, No.2). She stated that “as the academy continues to consider systemic racism and ways to de-colonize preaching and teaching, a look at how we grade may be in order.”¹ Utley calls for an assessment of pedagogical practices that should not be limited to grading but should also extend to the course materials that are assigned to students. It is the contention of this brief essay related to best practices in education that the resources for teaching the history of preaching should be re-evaluated because many traditional materials serve to perpetuate racism and racial biases.

Edwin Charles Dargan first published *A History of Preaching* in 1905. This was the primary text for the history of preaching until Hughes Oliphant Old published the first book in his multi-volume series in 1998, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. (The seventh and final volume of that series was published in 2010.)

Although homiletical scholars have provided reviews of the works of Dargan and the earlier works of Old, a comparative analysis of more recent volumes, such as that of Edwards, is long overdue. Determining whom to include and exclude in history books is certainly a daunting task. However, as histories are preserved, it is paramount that they are introduced in such a way as to acknowledge their omissions and that teachers provide historical examples of preachers and traditions that represent greater diversity among global preaching populations who have previously been ignored.

A recent evaluation of these histories on preaching points to some disconcerting realities. For example, in his sixth volume, Old finally looks at preachers who are not men of European descent. He provides what he considers to be “the beginnings of black preaching,” but in this chapter he reviews only five preachers.²

In his seventh and final volume, Old does indeed include women preachers. However, among the 70 preachers in this volume, only two are women: Fleming Rutledge and Aimee Semple McPherson. He also looks at African preaching. One might be thankful to see that Old included African preachers; overall, however, he is not complimentary of many of them. For example, he says of Peter Jasper Akinola, “from the standpoint of the homiletician, these sermons do not have much to offer. They are repetitive, they ramble, and they have little

¹ Allie Utley, “Best Practices in Education: Standards Based Grading,” *Homiletic*, 47 no. 2 (2022): 27-28.

² Hughes Oliphant Old. *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI. W.B. Eerdmans, 2007, 583.

illustrative material.”³ Even when he approves of the style of preaching, Old’s words are not approving. In his consideration of Conrad Mbewe, he says, “these sermons, out of Africa as they may be, are the most profound of Christian doxology.”⁴ Old does provide brief histories of Asian preaching and Latin American preaching in the seventh volume.

O.C. Edwards includes more women and African American men in his single volume than does Old. However, there is a voiceless void from preachers in South America, Asia and Africa. Edwards’s style of historiography is more objective than that of Old. He simply presents biographical information and sermons, leaving the critique to the reader.

Teachers seeking to provide examples of a more expansive history of Black preaching might include Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas’s *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*. For women preachers of the past, E. Lee Hancock, ed., *The Book of Women’s Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other’s Voices* and Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, eds., *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection* provide historic and recent examples of women preachers. These and other volumes are available to broaden our appreciation and understanding of Black and women preachers. These as well as the works of Native American, Asian-American, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and other preachers and scholars, need to be included, also.

In light of these concerns, the following questions are of great importance to teachers of preaching: Should teachers continue to use course materials that ignore vast groups of preachers and diverse preaching traditions and that perpetuate racism and bias? If so, what preparatory words of caution need to be offered to students in order to contextualize these histories? Regardless of how one answers these questions, it is evident that additional resources need to be promoted. There is certainly an opportunity for someone to write a history of preaching that offers a more ethnically, gender-aware, and geographically expansive view, including those who have been ignored or maligned, or to prepare a comprehensive online database that includes preachers and sermons of different eras and communities that would also help students to appreciate the range of preachers who may offer today’s students perspectives and insights into their own and others’ contexts (something similar to Wikipedia).

As Utley suggests, the academy must continue “to consider systemic racism and ways to de-colonize preaching and teaching.” Teachers in homiletics have a responsibility to work toward that good end by providing materials that do not perpetuate racism and bias. While some of what earlier scholars have produced in recounting the history of preaching may be useful for continued study, much is not. Past work is in dire need of updates and supplemental materials that more fully and fairly represent the range of voices that have contributed to homiletics in past and recent generations. Preaching has such a rich and diverse history that any course on the history of preaching should reflect that diversity.

³ Hughes Oliphant Old. *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI. W.B. Eerdmans, 2010, 218.

⁴ Ibid, 234.